

ROTHMANS ISTHMIAN LEAGUE



Rothmans are pulling out

ROTHMANS of Pall Mall, the cigarette company, are withdrawing all football sponsorship at the end of this season.

They announced their decision last week, coupled with further cuts in golf and aerobatics.

Rothmans' decision has a direct effect on two local football clubs, Wycombe Wanderers and Burnham who compete in the Rothmans Isthmian and Rothmans Hellenic Leagues. Both were saddened to hear the news.

The reason for the withdrawal is a new tax on cigarettes which would mean that if the company was to continue its sponsorship, the price of their products would have to increase. As this was totally against the Rothmans policy they were left with little choice but to end their contract with non-league football at the end of this season.

So where does this leave the four sponsored leagues? They must seek new sponsorship from other companies and although the initial outlay would seem to be expensive, it is generally thought that there will be no shortage of applicants wishing to take over from Rothmans. If none are forthcoming, the leagues could continue as before with no sponsorship.

The Rothmans sponsorship plan was accepted by the Isthmian League in 1973 when league chairman Barry East and several others negotiated an attractive two year contract and an optional third year with the company. Rothmans pledged themselves to attacking, clean

football and rewarded clubs with financial incentives. League champions received £1,000 for example and a £40 bonus was given for a three clear goal victory. Most of the cash was taken away, however, if clubs exceeded an eight point penalty limit for bookings and dismissals.

The impact of Rothmans was soon to make its mark. Cautions and sendings off dropped considerably while the standard of football improved steadily to fall in line with the league's one aim — to become the best league outside the professional game.

Rothmans spent out £50,000 in their first year and expansion to further leagues, the Northern, Western, Hellenic and Channel Islands saw their costs increase to £65,000 in 1975, £70,000 in 1976 and an estimated £90,000 in '77. Although this seems a large amount of money, the success of Rothmans main product — Rothmans King size — more than justified the expenditure.

Tony Williams, the Rothmans representative in charge of football said this week: "To me this was the perfect sponsorship. We achieved local loyalty and covered 150 areas throughout football. I feel sure other companies will be only too pleased to step in."

League secretary Ingram Whittingham said: "We are obviously very disappointed but we really appreciate all Rothmans have done, not only in our league, but for sport in general."

"The impact of sponsorship in our league has always been evident and certainly improved the standard of football. Not only that it brought entertaining play and a greatly improved standard of sportsmanship.

"I think the current economic climate had a lot to do with their decision to pull out."

Despite the sizeable blow to the Isthmians, Mr Whittingham is still confident they can continue their aim to become the top league outside the professional game. "This is not the end of the world. It will mean we will all have to work harder and we may have to look elsewhere for sponsorship.

"Rothmans' decision will have no effect on the planned formation of a third division in the Isthmian League."

He added: "We were a strong league before Rothmans came along four years ago and we can carry on as before if necessary.

"Clubs do not rely on sponsorship, most of them are self supporting. After all, it was only the major money winners like Enfield, Wycombe and Dagenham who won sizeable amounts of money."

For Wycombe Wanderers, the sponsorship was totally in line with their attitude to football. Under manager Brian Lee they claimed a total of £4,835.34 in prize money, more than any other club.

Wycombe won £1,675.97 in 1973-74. They received £1,000 for winning the league, £440 for three clear goal wins and £235.97 from the sportsmanship pool. The following year they retained the title for another £1,000 and added £360 in three goal wins and £433.65 from the sportsmanship pool.

Last season, despite finishing runners-up, they still topped the £1,000 mark with £500 for second place, £400 for three goal victories and £465.72 from the sportsmanship pool.

Western League side Falmouth Town are the second largest money winners with £3,576.86 while Northern Leaguers Blyth Spartans won £3,227.79.

This sort of money certainly helped many clubs through difficult times but it was the ideals of Rothmans that gave the most benefit. Their pledge to clean and skilful football brought a new lease of life to the non-league game.

Wycombe Wanderers chairman Mr Reg Williams was disappointed to hear the news of Rothmans' withdrawal. He said: "Sponsorship has given the Isthmian League a real boost and Rothmans did much to narrow the gap between amateur and professional football.

"I'm disappointed but can understand the Rothmans point of view. I hope the gap can be filled."

Another local club to benefit financially from Rothmans sponsorship were Burnham of the Hellenic League. They earned about £100 in the first two years of sponsorship but hit the jackpot last season.

By clinching the Premier Division League championship and cup double Burnham took £900 prize money — a handy bonus for the progressive club situated on the outskirts of Slough.

An ambitious club like Burnham is always on the look-out for improving their football in a higher league. One of the main factors in wanting to stay in the Hellenic after their 'double' season was the benefit to be gained by Rothmans sponsorship.

Already this season they have collected £80 in goal bonuses.